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Bill Would Guarantee Benefits to C.I.A. Spouses

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WASHINGTON, May 4 — Barbara Colby, the wife of William E. Colby, former Director of Central Intelligence, remembers the times overseas when she turned on the washing machine at their home to make sure that no one could overhear her husband's conversation with an intelligence source.

She recalls the countless times she had to play the role of a diplomat's wife, playing hostess at embassy parties, attending teas, talking about foreign affairs, to help her husband maintain his cover as a diplomat when, in reality, he was a spy.

Mr. Colby, who headed the Central Intelligence Agency from 1973 to 1976, can't forget the emergency calls that came in the middle of the night when his wife would ask where he was going and when he would be back, and all he could tell her was that he was going out and would be back later.

Because of these memories, and a belief that the Government has failed to recognize the unusual hardships faced by the spouses of American intelligence agents overseas, the Colbys are supporting an effort to rewrite Federal law to make sure that spouses receive a fair share of the partner's retirement and disability benefits.

The effort, which has received a cool response from the C.I.A. and generated a hostile reaction from many former agents, will be the subject of a closed hearing Wednesday by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

The committee is considering legislation that would amend the Central Intelligence Retirement Act of 1964 by guaranteeing that spouses of agents, including those who are divorced, receive a share of retirement and disability benefits in proportion to the time the couple was married and based overseas. According to intelligence officials, the divorce rate among intelligence agents is unusually high, although they would provide no precise figures.

Women Most Affected

The legislation would apply to both men and women whose spouses were employed overseas by the agency, although because most such employees are men, most beneficiaries would be women. Spouses of C.I.A. employees

based in the United States would not be covered, the assumption being that they are not subject to the same pressures as those based abroad.

Under current law, employees of the C.I.A., like most Federal workers, have no obligation to share benefits with spouses or former spouses. They can be forced to do so by a court order, but former spouses contend that security considerations often prevent the introduction in divorce litigation of information about a marriage or career that would justify the sharing of benefits.

Opponents of the change argue that giving spouses a right to benefits will hamper the recruiting of intelligence agents. "It will be a disincentive if people are afraid that marital problems will lead to a loss of retirement benefits," said one former agent, who asked not to be identified.

The Colbys and others supporting the change, including a bipartisan group of senators, contend that they are only trying to gain for C.I.A. spouses what the spouses of foreign service officers already have. In 1980, Congress approved changes in the Foreign Service Act to provide for the equitable sharing of benefits by former spouses of American diplomats.

If anything, they assert, the pressures faced by the spouses of intelligence agents are greater than the problems experienced by those of Foreign Service officers. The C.I.A. itself underscored the problem by insisting that Wednesday's Senate hearing be conducted in secret and that all case histories prepared by supporters of the change be classified.

"I'd like to discuss the problems but the agency has told us not to," said one of the women. Dale Petersen, a spokesman for the intelligence agency, said that it never comments on overseas operations. Staff members on the House Intelligence Committee, which has considered similar legislation, reported that the C.I.A. was not enthusiastic about changes in the benefit system that would be limited to intelligence agents.

One of the bill's sponsors, Senator Daniel K. Inouye, Democrat of Hawaii, highlighted some of the unusual problems when he introduced the legislation last month. "The occurrence of clandestine activities," he said, "may cause the spouse special problems in the management of the household." In addition, he said that C.I.A. families stationed abroad face the constant threat of exposure and

'When you live under cover, you live a lie.'

—a C.I.A. wife

'You Live a Lie'

Senator Barry Goldwater, the Arizona Republican who heads the intelligence committee, is another sponsor of the legislation. He told his colleagues that opponents of the C.I.A. who published the names of agents also disclosed the names of spouses to help impede the agency's work.

Several women who lived abroad when their husbands were on foreign assignments said that the senators' remarks provided only a small idea of what they had experienced. "When you live under cover, you live a lie," said one. "You can't confide in friends about the pressures on your husband; you can't even tell your children what their father really does. You live under a constant strain."

According to former intelligence officials, most spouses of intelligence agents are not called on to provide direct support of clandestine operations, but do help indirectly. If a woman's husband is posing as a businessman, for example, she would have to socialize with the families of others employed by the same company.

Mr. Colby, in a book about his career at the C.I.A., described an automobile tour in the early 1950's that he and his family took in an unidentified European country. Ostensibly, he wrote, they were visiting historic castles. In fact, the trunk of the car was packed with radio equipment that Mr. Colby turned over to an intelligence agent during a brief clandestine meeting in a remote forest. Just another family vacation, Mr. Colby said in an interview.

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